

Minto Songs

A collaborative project on Athabascan language and art

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Photos by Elizabeth Leitzell¹

Introduction

This project set out to address a community-defined need for assistance in the transmission of a Native Alaskan musical and poetic tradition.



The North Fork Store in Minto, and the Minto Flats. Minto (Menhti, “Among the Lakes”) is at the end of a road; the next gas is over 100 miles away.

¹ Ms. Leitzell, a freelance documentary photographer, accompanied project members to the May 2009 workshop as a volunteer, and donated the use of her photographs for this article.

Community background

Geography

The community of Minto (Menhti) lies about 130 miles northwest of Fairbanks, Alaska. This village is known as “New Minto” because it was created, and moved to, in response to repeated flooding of the historical Tanana River site of the village, now called “Old Minto.”

Ethnography

The people of Minto are Alaskan Athabascans. Their indigenous culture is characterized by a complex kinship system and seasonal subsistence activities including hunting of moose, caribou, small game and birds, salmon and whitefish fishing, and berry gathering. The people of Minto have been in contact with people of European heritage since the late 19th century, when steamboats began to work the Tanana, serving settlers and prospectors during the Alaska gold rush.



Neal and Geraldine Charlie discuss a linguistic question.

Major players

In this project, the major players are a group of Minto elders and members of their families, who have been concerned for years about the failure of natural transmission of their language and other aspects of their culture. Specifically, traditional chief Neal Charlie and his wife Geraldine, and Berkman and Sarah Silas, have championed the

cause of song study, in the hope of harnessing the appeal of song and dance to the transmission of their language to younger generations.

Language background

Basic information

The Lower Tanana Athabascan language, now spoken only in Minto, is moderately well documented. It is one of the eleven Athabascan languages spoken in Alaska. Krauss' text collection, notes and historical-comparative analysis published Minto data as early as 1964, and produced a noun dictionary (1974). Kari's lexicographic and ethnogeographical work (1994) has provided a strong basis for many linguistic and cultural inquiries. Tuttle (1998, 2003) addresses prosodic structure and the relationships among lexical tone, stress and intonation. The language is verb-final and polysynthetic. It is relatively conservative prosodically, in that its verb prefix phonology is more transparent than that of other Athabascan languages, although it does have low tone from historical vowel constriction.



Josephine Riley looks at an old photograph in the Minto School library. This library serves as a meeting place and research station for many projects, including ours.

The Athabascan language spoken in Minto is the last dialect surviving of the language known as Tanana or Lower Tanana. It is extremely endangered, with no native speakers under the age of 70, and fluent elders passing on. Never spoken by great numbers of people, *Menhti Kenaga*, or *Benhti kokht'ana kenaga*, "the Minto people's language" as the elders prefer to call it (Tuttle 2009), is now spoken by fewer than ten people. During

the time of this project, four elders passed on, all of whom had been active in language revitalization efforts at different times. The grief and frustration that this occasions is palpable in the Minto community, both in the village and outside it. Aside from the undeniable cultural importance of memorial potlatch songs, there are probably also social reasons that memorial songs surface so easily in conversations about culture and language. We are working with the last group of elders with sufficient cultural and historical knowledge, and sufficient knowledge of the language, to decode some of the older archived songs. For some material, the time is already past.



Neal Charlie, Josephine Riley and Linda Charlie listen to an old recording with headphones at the May 2009 workshop. Student Gail Davidson copies recordings in the background.

Song types

Previous discussions of Minto song and dance have focused on music and dance movement, without much attention to the structure of song lyrics. Various song types are attested in different sources, differentiated mainly by function.

Lundstrom (1980) identifies *magic songs*, to include healing songs, hunting songs and songs to improve general conditions; *animal story songs* which appear within stories; *potlatch songs* to honor the deceased, *mourning songs* to express sorrow, and *dance songs*.

Pearce (1985) identifies *animal songs* as those made by animals and learned through dreams. These songs are very, very old: Pearce cites moose, bear, caribou and rabbit as having passed songs on this way. Other categories include a *dance for a gift* song, *ice*

cream songs (used when making *nonadhdodi*, or “Indian ice cream”, *New Year’s Day* songs, and the following *Party Song* types: *Potlatch songs*, songs sung at a potlatch accompanied by the waving of hands, and *Dance songs*. Pearce’s thesis focuses on dance songs.

Johnston (1994) sorts the potlatch song categories as follows: *potlatch songs*, *sorry songs*, and *dance songs*. In this article he does not pursue other categories of song.

The preceding listings may seem somewhat contradictory, but they are not. There are simply quite a few categories of song employed by Minto songmakers and community members.

In this project, elders tried their best to positively identify the function of songs we talked about, along with the date of composition, the occasion of composition, and the translation of lyrics. For some of the old songs, the words were well understood; for some they were very difficult to approach. Some examples will be discussed below.



Sarah Silas sings.

Musical background

The musical styles of dance songs are well described in Pearce (1985), which contains many examples with musical transcription, though none with aligned lyrics. Lundström

(1980) exemplifies all the song types he discusses, with musical notation and aligned phonetic notation of lyrics. Johnston's (1994) article, which approaches musical styles of several Alaskan Athabascan groups, does not include musical notation, but discusses details of musical structure for each type, and includes translations of lyrics and discussion of their content.

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In terms of musical structure, performance details and the structure of lyric content, Pearce and Johnston focus on potlatch songs and dance songs. Lundstrom (1980), which like Johnston (1994) deals with music from a number of Alaskan Athabascan groups and a variety of song types, summarizes musical structure and places it within the context of other North American indigenous music. He finds that the Dena'ina, Minto and Tanacross songs studied in his sample show important similarities to Southern Athabascan material (Apache and Navajo): "steady drumbeat without syncopation and dotted rhythms, dominance of two durational values in most of the songs, relatively rare syncopations and dotted rhythms in the melodic line...[and] lack of tempo changes" (Lundström 1980:160). He also finds some similarities in song form. Generally, the conclusion is that Alaskan Athabascan music resembles Southern Athabascan music more than it does the music of the Alaskan coast, that is, Yup'ik or Inupiaq music. This is consistent with the comparative linguistic evidence that reconstructs proto-Athabascan, the mother language of the family, as having been spoken in the north less than three thousand years ago (##). However, Lundström also notes similarities to music of the Northwest coast to the south of Alaska, and points to a predominance of narrower intervals than in Apachean music. Lundström also points, in particular, to a falling contour in Alaskan Athabascan songs, particularly dance songs (1980:155). He notes a tendency for repeated tones at the end of lines or sections.

Johnston and Lundström agree in designating the predominant scale in Alaskan Athabascan songs as pentatonic, with many narrow intervals, predominantly falling.

Pearce's study of Minto and Nenana dance songs finds that Minto songs are equally likely to use a six-note scale as a five-note scale. Pearce (1985:174) notes a particular "ending" pattern for the dance songs, which includes several structural properties (three measures with particular rhythmic patterns, a falling melodic contour culminating in a flat contour, and relatively low final pitch) and several performance properties (glottalization, increased speed, increased volume, increased accentuation, and transposition up an octave for some singers.)

All three of these researchers are ethnomusicologists, and where they discuss the lyrics to songs, they are interested in content, which has usually been translated as a sentence unit by a bilingual consultant or by a linguist. The structure of lyric language is not approached.



Virgil Titus plays guitar after a workshop session, while Susan Paskvan works with the late Linda Charlie in the school library. While our project focused on traditional Athabascan song, the presence of music in the school invited practitioners of other styles as well. Country-Western music, sometimes sung in the Minto language, is popular in the village and extended communities.

Structure of the project

Archive & recordings

This project set out to integrate archived Minto music present in the Alaska Native Language Center archive with information from elders and other sources. While there is some musical recording that has been labeled as music (including the very excellent collection of dance songs submitted by Pearce with his 1985 master's thesis) many of our existing song recordings lay embedded in longer recordings consisting of story-telling or grammatical elicitation. Most ANLC recordings are presently labeled at the level of the audiotape or CD object, without internal annotation. A student technician spent the period of the project listening to 44 Minto recordings in the ANLC archive in real time, defining points of transition within them, and marking the presence of music. These recordings were presented to the elders and discussed with them.

Database

The student's listening process produced an internally annotated database of Minto recordings that can be integrated into the larger digital archive of Alaska Native language recordings. This database provides a structure for further annotation with metadata as the project sessions and workshop data are analyzed.

Translation and transcription

The novel product of this project, which is naturally the slowest to emerge, is the translation and transcription of song lyrics for the archived songs and those that the elders added to the record during the project. This took place in two venues. Two workshops were held in Minto, at which elders were invited to listen to older recordings and to resing songs they knew, recite lyrics in spoken form, and explain the meanings of songs.

Sessions were held with one or two elders at a time, often in Fairbanks, where elders travel for medical purposes and sometimes have time for language work. In sessions we went deeper into translation problems and often re-sang songs in order to get a cleaner recording for archiving. One song could easily dominate a session. As a byproduct of these discussions, elders often offered short teaching texts in the Minto language that will contribute a great deal to the overall record of this language. Such texts include a story that explains the animal-inspired "caribou song," and its importance, a discussion of how songs are made, advice on the teaching of young people, and appeals for language revitalization.

In some cases translation of song lyrics is fairly straightforward, with relatively few words being present in a song, all well remembered. In some cases, however, it is nearly impossible, due to a combination of poor sound quality on recordings, loss of cultural information with the older generation, and archaic or poetic language in lyrics. The songs therefore present a range of difficulty for the translation process.

A second set of very rare recordings was discussed during the project; these were recordings made by Swedish anthropologist Anna Birgitta Rooth and her associates during her research in Alaska in the 1960s.



Berkman Silas plays the “fiddle song” while his wife Sarah sings the Minto words. Musical instruments, except the small hand-held drum, are not used in traditional Minto music, but hybrid songs such as this one represent post-contact creativity.

Metadata

There are two layers of metadata involved in this project: that collected for the archived recordings, and that included in descriptions of recordings made at workshops and sessions. The session recordings and workshop recordings will be archived at the Alaska Native Language Center once they are processed. For songs, we attempted to learn the name of the composer, the occasion of composition, the date of composition, and any other information the elders remembered about that song. Session recordings will be archived by date and order of recording, along with metadata including participants and topic.

Best practice information

This project was inspired and led by the Minto elders. The most important goal was to respond to their desire to work with the music and make it more accessible to the generations to come.

Listening and cataloguing

Modern fieldworkers are often advised to keep good track of their recordings, to label them in transparent fashion, and to include all necessary metadata when archiving them. Many of the older materials we dealt with could serve as object lessons to bring these points home. However, it should be kept in mind that in most of these old recordings, music was a by-catch, and not the focus of the session at the time. Perhaps what our project can show is that when archiving sessions, fieldworkers should consider what might constitute by-catch in their work, and label it.



Sarah Silas inspects a GIS map annotated by James Kari with Minto placenames. The discussion of songs and their composition brings up many questions, including those involved with native geography. All the props and resources are packed along just in case – including the magnifiers.

Workshops

Our workshops were conducted in tandem with visits to Minto by Susan Paskvan, cultural coordinator at the Yukon Kuskokwim School District, which includes Minto. This increased the efficiency of our work by bringing community members to the school, which served as a research venue.

For workshops, researchers either traveled to Minto and back by car in one day (possible in seasons with extended daylight; total 260 miles) or stayed in the school library, sleeping on the floor in sleeping bags. Setting up and staying in the library placed us in a predictable situation, where community members knew where to find us. Because the school has a kitchen, it also allowed us to prepare meals for workshop participants (our workshop plans always included a big shopping trip for supplies, and consultation about recipes) and to share tea and coffee and conversation at any time with people who wanted to know about the project, or who had other questions about what we were doing there. The contribution of the school district to this project is therefore incalculable.

At workshops, participants were each presented with a description of the project, theirs to keep, a consent form for participation, and once a recording had been made, a transmittal form to request permission to archive the proceedings. Elders were paid an hourly rate for participation.

The school district also held some meetings in Fairbanks, which allowed the PI more contact with elders and insight into their interests. During one such workshop meeting, the elders translated “The Star-Spangled Banner” into Minto at the request of the Minto language teacher, Madeline Riley, with the help of the PI. This took two full days of work, since the English poetry of the anthem is difficult to translate culturally. The result, we understand, is now sung at Minto Lakers basketball games.

Sessions

Sessions for the Songs project were mainly conducted in the PI’s home in Fairbanks. They usually lasted two to three hours and focused on a set of similar songs. Neal and Geraldine Charlie, and Sarah and Berkman Silas, were the most frequent participants. Tea, coffee and food were often served. Elders were paid an hourly rate for participation. Sessions for this project were often scheduled by the elders themselves, because they traveled back and forth from Minto to Fairbanks much more frequently than the PI. They would call to signal availability, and the house would be swept and the tea made. This meant that the PI had to be ready for a song session at any time, which increased the challenge to session planning. However, the organizational work being done by the student technician helped a great deal with this.

I would not want to suggest that such an arrangement constitutes a general “best practice” for fieldwork. However, in the context of central Alaska, it is not an unusual way to work, because it allows the most important partner in the project, the Native elder, to exert more control over the process of research. The main principle is to create an environment in which the person with the information, the native speaker and songmaker of Minto, feels that he or she can communicate what is important. It is up to the researcher to understand what is communicated.



Snowshoe hare crosses Third Street in Minto.

Community results

The results of this community-driven project fall into several categories. Some are social, some archival, and some academic. In this section I consider separately some apparent effects of this project on the Minto community (those living in Minto), the extended community (mostly Fairbanks), the archived data for Minto music, and for linguistic understanding of Minto language and linguistic art.

Local community

The Minto community—those who live in Minto—is divided by generation and by orientation. The oldest generation grew up speaking the language (a very conservative Alaskan Athabascan language) and is generally not highly educated in the Western tradition. Their sons and daughters are experienced but tend not to be proficient in the language, having been educated in Western schools where native language use was discouraged. The two generations below this are generally not experienced or proficient with the language, because the chain of natural transmission was broken. The youngest two generations are very interested in learning what their parents and especially grandparents know. The words to the songs are a high priority for them. This is partly because an important part of their cultural identity takes the form of performance with the Minto Dancers, a very well-regarded group that performs all over Alaska, and sings its own music. The elders want the younger ones to know the words to the songs and what they mean; the younger ones want to know too. The elders are also very concerned with the transmission of knowledge about song lyrics – who may sing them and when, who wrote them and when and who for. Our annotations are an attempt to satisfy their need to record this information.

Database

The archive database is useful to this community because it makes it easier to find recordings made by family members. When people visit the Alaska Native Language Center or speak with its representatives, it is easier to locate materials for them and to make copies.

Recording copies

One result of this project is that more people have more copies of recordings of their family members than ever before. During our final workshop in May 2009, we copied CDs for family members on request, helped by the database created by the student technician. We did this whether or not it was song data they were requesting.

Workshop participation

The Minto-based workshops for this project brought new participants into the language-study enterprise. A very strong, conservative cohort of Minto elders has led language and culture inquiries for many years, but as they begin to pass away, younger community members find a place at the table and begin to contribute. Several younger elders attended our workshops and made significant contributions.

Young learners of the language, separated from the most fluent elders by two generations of failed transmission, are avidly interested in language and culture and were active participants at the workshops to the extent their work schedules allowed.

Song lyric transcription

Progress has definitely been made in song lyric transcription. There is a great deal more to be done, of course, as we find each time we meet with the elders who were part of this project, and they volunteer more data even though the honoraria have ceased.

Extended community

As is often the case with remote Native American communities, not everybody who “is” Minto lives in Minto. Quite a few people from Minto families live in Fairbanks, 130 miles away, but many others have moved even farther away. These people constitute a kind of virtual village, since they are closely related to the songmakers of Minto and those they sing about, and the fate of the moribund Minto language is very important to them.

Collaboration with Paskvan

It is very important to recognize the contribution of Susan Paskvan, Cultural Coordinator for the Yukon-Kuskokwim School district, to the success of this project. Ms. Paskvan, a Koyukon Athabaskan, has been working with songs in her part of Alaska (west of the Minto area), and has raised interest and developed workshop techniques as a result. While most of the transcription and translation in the present project has been done in small sessions rather than in workshops, the excitement that larger groups bring to the enterprise has been invaluable, and we have followed Paskvan’s example in including them. Behind Paskvan’s contribution is, of course, the support provided to her by the school district itself in creating her position and financing her travel to villages in the district’s large territory. Nevertheless, much of what Ms. Paskvan has done with music and lyrics has been as a volunteer.

Community meetings/classes

One of the synergistic activities shared with Ms. Paskvan is a newly established Fairbanks-based meeting once a week to work with Minto songs. This regular meeting is hosted by the Denaakkanaaga unit of the Tanana Chiefs Conference. This activity brings together elders who were involved in the NEH project and members of the Fairbanks Minto community. The PI attends these meetings and works with elders present on musical material of the group's choosing. Using methods developed during the project, we continue to lay groundwork for future projects to be carried out by members of the community. We consider this development of community interest to be in part a result of the Minto Songs project, in part an increase in interest spurred by recent elder losses, and in part a response to Ms. Paskvan's work with Koyukon elders, many of whom also reside in Fairbanks. We also believe the "Elders' Living Room" created by Denaakkanaaga in their offices in the Morris Thompson Cultural Center has made a very important contribution to community interest. The combination of factors is making a strongly positive impact on the extended Minto community in Fairbanks.

Song lyric transcription

Community interest in reclaiming, understanding and archiving old recordings has, if anything, increased since the PI was directed by the Minto elders to attempt the Songs project. Both elders who participated in the project, and other community members who have recordings in their homes, have brought forward more material that they want documented, and we continue to work with them. The elders, the PI and ANLC emeritus James Kari are all putting in volunteer hours to support this activity.

Language and linguistic art

Song types and lyric types identified

The Minto elders identified the following types of songs during sessions and workshops.

Type	Made by	Still made now	Remembered	Songmaker known
dance song	anyone	yes	yes	sometimes
potlatch memorial song	songmaker	yes	sometimes	sometimes
mourning song	family member of deceased	yes	usually not	yes
love song	songmaker	yes	yes	yes
lullaby	anyone	no	yes	yes
art song	songmaker	yes	yes	sometimes
ice cream songs	animal/shaman	no	usually not	no
songs in stories	?	no	yes	no
bird-song or animal-cry songs	unknown	no	yes	no

We have probably not identified all possible types of songs created by Minto songmakers in this chart, but it is a start. In this paper we will not present details of every type of song, but will rather discuss particular music-lyric relationships we have noticed. In this section, I will not notate tunes, but will indicate sections of songs and where in the scale they begin and end (nearly always, as Lundström (1980) indicates, beginning high and ending low.)

The dance song is the type that has been most thoroughly studied musically. As Pearce (1985) noted, there are subtypes of these songs. As an example here of an animal dance song, consider the “Squirrel Song,” which is often performed by the Minto Dancers. In the following transcription, the “H” at the beginning of each section indicates the highest pitch in the song; the “L” at the end is the lowest.



Dlega. (Red squirrel, tamiasciurus hudsonicus)

H - Yusi, yusi, dlek tl'oniyo
 A-ha-a-a-a, o-o-o-oo,
 Iyeh, ye'ohey'eyey, ey'owey (dlek, dlek, dlek, dlek!). – L

H – Ehu'ey'eye'hiyeye'
 Ohey'ey'eh
 ohiyo, o'ohey'o – L

H - Yusi, yusi, dlek tl'oniyo
 Oho'oyo'o-o-o-o
 Iyeh'ohi'iyi - L

L - Eyho'eyeh
 Hey'hu'e'e'ehiyeh
 Ye'ohe'e'e
 Oneya o'o'hey'o - L

K'wda
 That's enough.

This song has four sections, the first three beginning with a high pitch and ending with a low pitch, and the fourth remaining low throughout. The first and third sections include the words “*Yusi, yusi, dlek tl'oniyo*” and the remainder of the words are vocables, singing words without meaning. In the transcription above, when an apostrophe follows a vowel, it indicates a glottal stop or glottal constriction; the <h>, a glottal fricative, and <y>, a palatal approximant, are the other two onsets in the vocable syllables. In the last

line of the first section, two singers sing the low vocables and a third sings the squirrel's call [*dlek dlek dlek*] at a high pitch, laughing. The lyric line *Yusi, yusi, dlek tl'oniyo* means "Squirrel goes gathering," but the words are not as they would be pronounced in speech. *Yusi* wasn't translated as a separate word, and the normal word for "squirrel" is *dlega* with two syllables rather than one. *Tl'oniyo* is made up of the prefix *tl'o-* "into storage" and the verb theme for "singular goes". However, this particular theme, while understandable, has not surfaced in conversation; more commonly *tl'o-* is combined with handling verbs that indicate the type of storage or the type of the thing being stored, as in *tl'oxeyenelayh* "they put them away," using the handling verb stem for multiple objects.

This example includes a number of the elements that also turn up in more complex examples. Words may have more or fewer syllables in song than in speech, words may be used that are not used in conversation, and there are many vocalizations that are not words in the language. It may also be noted that while vocable sections can begin at a high pitch or a low pitch, the meaningful words of the song are sung at a high pitch at the beginning of a section (thus, at the highest pitch used in the song). The recorded performance of this song (May, 2005) also includes the addition of animal sounds over the main melody. This is an old song, without a known composer.

Old songs and folklore

In reviewing old recordings with the elders, we found that while original lyrics could not always be re-elicited, matched, or analyzed, there were sometimes alternate versions known, and other folklore that added to knowledge about the archived material. An example is the "rain-making" song collected in Lundström's article in Rooth (1980:137). The lyrics as notated by Lundström are:

Ya ko-o-le-chu-le-ta-le-ye-e
Ya-a yaya, ya-a ya-a ya-a a

The gloss given is "Clear again! No more rain! Cloudy get up there!" The song is embedded in a story about a man chopping ice.

Lundström's work with the old recordings collected by Rooth and her colleagues made it possible to play this recording for the elders in the May 2009 Minto workshop. Rendered in Minto orthography, the song lyrics sounded like:

Ye'ogw lechole toliyo
Outside it isn't raining, go up
No rain, go up

Yozronh yo, yozronh yo
Sky-is-clear sky sky-is-clear sky
Clear sky, clear sky

These lyrics may not be in the Minto language. If they mean what they seem to, the *l* in *tolio* suggests a dialect of Koyukon, not Lower Tanana (expected *todhiyo*). However, the use of the *zr* retroflex in *yozoneh* is a Minto trait and not one found in Koyukon.

It would not be surprising to find Minto or Nenana people who could sing in Koyukon, which is a closely related, next-door language. Nor would it be too surprising if sounds in such a text did not stay stable, but began to be nativized.

The mystery of this text was not solved by consultation with the Minto elders, but it was elaborated. Neal Charlie did not translate this text, but instead offered (and sang) another version:

Uto'ayi, sech'etthatthila' setl'ogh no'i'oyh
My-Ind-axe-poss me-to back-2s-give
Give me my axe back

Eya, yozronh
Clear-sky
Clear sky

Eya, yozronh
Clear-sky
Clear sky

This version is clearly in the Minto language. The tune is different, however. In addition to the new song, we also learned that the phrase *yozoneh* is used by itself to chase away rain and that whistling and the use of noisemakers were sometimes employed as well.

Effects of rhythm on lyric language

Elders told us to watch for words to be pronounced differently in song than in speech. We found that sometimes syllables were added to words; e.g., *sungha* 'my elder brother' (two syllables in normal speech) was pronounced *sunegha'a* (four syllables) in the context of a strongly rhythmic memorial song chorus: the trochaic rhythm, X.X., seemed to fit better with the two full-vowel syllables *su* and *gha* falling on downbeats, and the light vowel *e* and the added syllable *'a* falling on offbeats.

Likewise, the word *goya* 'small' (two syllables) was pronounced *go* (one syllable) in combination with *segoya* 'my child' in the same kind of rhythmic chorus, making the combination *segoya go* 'my little child' a four-syllable unit in some instances. In this case, vowel quality did not seem to play a role; the normally light syllable *se-* bears the downbeat, and the stem vowel *o* in *segoya* inhabits an offbeat.

The Minto language allows many adjustments of syllable number in longer words in speech, let alone in music; light vowels may be pronounced fully or extremely briefly, or simply elided, if they are not in a position of prominence (Tuttle 1998). This makes it possible for long Minto words to be adjusted to musical demands without much effect on their faithfulness to rules of speech pronunciation.

Effects of language on tunes and performance

It is sometimes suggested that linguistic patterns of a language (particularly those involved in speech rhythm) can influence the verbal art of people who speak that language. (Patel 2008). Finding evidence of this influence is more difficult than asserting it, however.

Lexical tone, which does exist in Minto, might be a suspect in determining melodic structure. That is, a tone pattern might be replicated, and maybe amplified in range, in a song. To determine if that is the case in this language, a large study would need to be done that directly compares the tones expected in speech and the pitches employed in songs. Minto has low tone from historical vowel construction (Leer 1979) which, in speech, spreads to the left from affected syllables within certain morphological domains. It also has high-rising tones on the negative suffix and two other less frequent morphemes. This tone distinction is much more salient than the aforementioned low tone.

Impressionistically, however, it seems unlikely that such a study would yield a direct relationship. Glottalization, which resulted in low tone historically and is often present in vowels followed by coda glottal stop, is independently used throughout Minto singing as a stylistic element, with single vowels broken by glottal pulses, beat by beat. Lexically low tones do not seem to be placed in any particular area of a song to correspond to melodic low tones.

However, there is a tendency, noted by Pearce, Johnston and Lundström, for low tones to repeat in a series at the end of a song. This is not easy to relate to intonational patterns – final lowering is clearly present in Minto (Tuttle 1998) but the lowest point is normally completely final or post-final, the end of a trajectory that may reach past the end of spoken segments. Repeated low tones are, instead, a pattern seen in tone sandhi in this language. For example, the word seen above, ‘my axe’ would be pronounced as an utterance:

M M L L L
Sech’etthatthila’
My-ind-axe-Poss

The final syllable is the only one marked with low tone, but leftward spreading broadens the low pitch to three repeated syllables. In comparison, *sungha*, ‘my elder brother’

(which does not take the low-marked possessive marker) has no low-marked components, and would be pronounced as an utterance:

M L
Sungha
My-elder-brother

In this case, the only source for low pitch is intonational final lowering, and the repeated low tones do not occur. Given this comparison, we might be able to ask: can patterns, rather than pitches, in an Athabascan tonal system form part of melodic art? Comparison with song made by singers who spoke other languages of Alaska (Koyukon, non-tonal; Ahtna, non-tonal; Tanacross, high-marked; Upper Tanana, low-marked) might provide some answers to this question.



Song-making culture and composers

Sessions with elders, and workshops in this project, often contained discussion of the role of song-makers and their practice in traditional Minto life. Different kinds of songs were created in different ways: love songs and art songs, for example, were created by talented individuals, often when they were out on the land, and elders remember where certain songs were inspired. However, memorial and other potlatch songs were created in honor of occasions, sometimes commissioned by mourners and crafted by song-makers. Song-makers are always mentioned by name when they are known.

The process of listening to an old recording, and commenting on it, sometimes resulted in the re-singing of an old song, but sometimes triggered rewriting of lyrics rather than translation of the old ones. The elders said that this is because certain songs, especially memorial songs, were not transmitted, but that tunes could be used again and again. Moreover, the process of creating songs for a funeral or memorial potlatch involves the practice of going to someone's house and "drinking tea," while remembering old songs and working up new ones. The sessions and workshops in this project were reminiscent of "drinking tea," which facilitated memory and performance. They did not resemble an academic or laboratory experience. Along with these cultural factors, deafness, archaic language and poor sound quality sometimes resulted in inconclusive results. Nevertheless, success or failure was not predictable, and we found it worthwhile to ask about everything.



The boat landing road and Minto Flats.

Constraints and decisions

Community dissemination was originally projected to take the form of a website with linked audio and text, to be made available to the community to use according to their judgment. During the project, it became clear that it would be impractical to prepare such a website within the brief period of the project, though the technical problems related to it were basically solved.

The main reason for this is that the songs that turned out to be of most interest to the community were not public songs, but potlatch songs in memory of relatives, some of which are very old, some newer. The lyrics to these songs had not been traditionally transmitted (though the melodies were often re-used). They were one-time songs, not intended to be remembered after their performance at a funeral potlatch. Nevertheless, when they are remembered by songmakers and singers, they contain material that the elders consider essential to the understanding of their culture. It is likely that the passing of four important elders during the 15-month period of the project (a desperately sad number that represents nearly 25% of the fluent Minto-speaking population) affected the opinions of elders on the urgency of dealing with the more difficult material.

Despite many discussions, the Minto elders have not resolved the issue of how complete they want the public record of memorial song lyrics to be. They wanted to work with the material in this project because of its urgency, but were not ready to consider how to share it. For this reason, it seemed better to wait to create a fully linked website with all material included, and to return the recordings to the community in a more basic form, to allow further community discussion of how they should be used. Work continues (presently unfunded) on the materials of greatest interest, and these and new recordings will continue to be made available to community members both in Minto and elsewhere.

Although the original dissemination goal was not attainable during this first project, a full digital set of the Minto recordings from the Alaska Native Language Center were presented to the Minto School instead of a website, along with the catalogue database created as part of the project. Recordings and photographs made during workshops were also copied for community members. In addition to the Alaskan collection, a set of recordings made during the 1960s and 1970s by Swedish researchers was also copied, annotated with the help of elders, and made available to the school, along with photographs taken by the late researcher, Anna Brigitta Rooth. This presentation took place at the last Minto workshop in September 2009, during Håkan Lundström's visit to Alaska.



The late Linda Charlie. During a break in traditional song work, elders asked for some hymn translation. Mrs. Charlie is singing “Hwtl’aghwnh Da’ (The Sweet Bye and Bye)” in the Minto language.

Future directions

Community support

Continuing transcription/teaching/sharing

As noted above, it was easier to start this project than to end it – it refuses to end, and continues with the support of the Alaska Native Language Center and of volunteers. Naturally we are looking to develop more financial support for this work, but because of the extreme sense of urgency on all parts, the highest priority at the moment is documentation and translation with elders. Both activities are essential.

In addition to metadata and commentary on songs, a number of teaching texts were also collected during this project, growing naturally out of session structure. Transcription, translation and dissemination of these texts is a high priority, since they were contributed by elders with the purpose of transmitting traditional teachings to new generations. This should be a separate project, and will be developed as such.

Encouragement of extended community learners

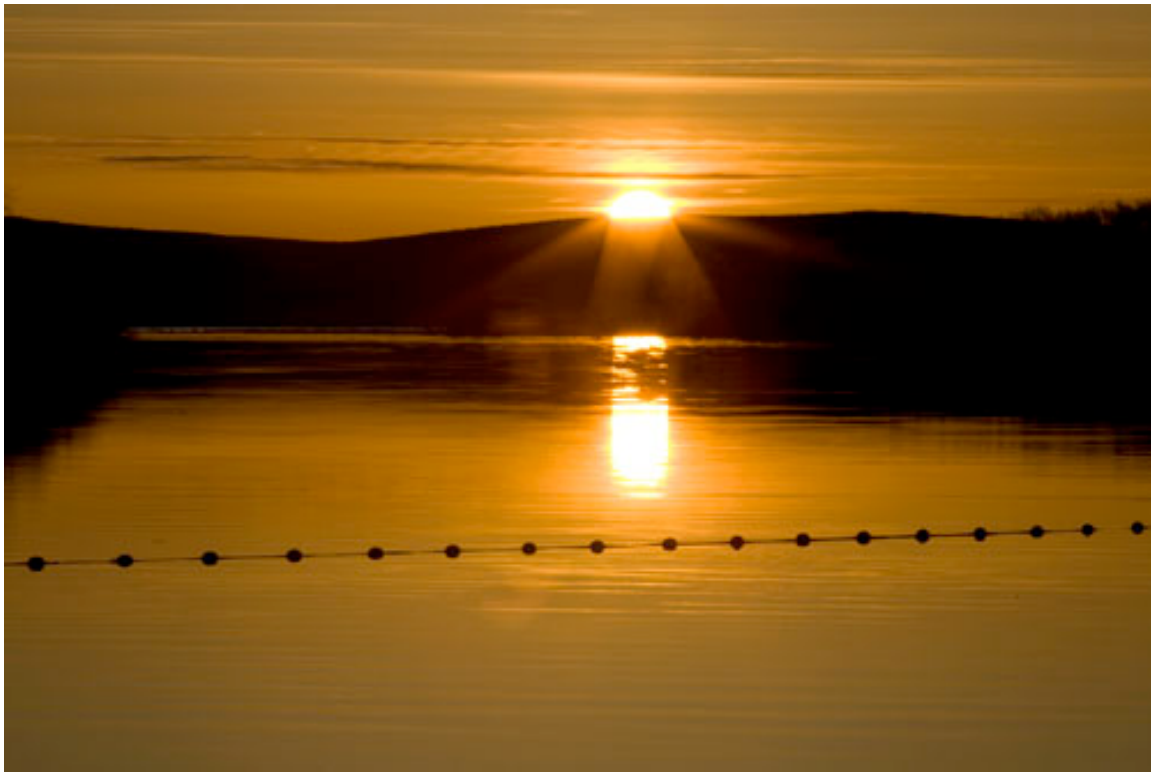
This project seems to have helped to open up some doors between the extended community of Minto and the University. As noted above, Denaakkanaagga’s “living room,” Paskvan’s Koyukon volunteer work, and this project seem to have dovetailed into a message that University people can help those who want to learn more about their heritage language. It is incumbent on us to crack the door open further by involving the extended community in further language and culture projects.

Language-Music interface

Research plan for music/lyric interaction study

This project was proposed and designed by a linguist, unlike previous studies of Minto song, which have been done from the ethnomusicologist's point of view. Since song crucially involves both music and language, both sides need to be considered in any study; however, the basic point of view can give a particular slant to the research question.

We have seen that Minto songs contain archaic and unusual language, and that words may be pronounced differently in songs than in speech; speakers recognize these facts and can discuss them. Musical rhythm seems to affect the pronunciation of words, but words also make demands on melody and rhythm. Larger structures, such as verses and choruses, are also correlated with linguistic structure. As more data is collected, we expect to dig deeper into these relationships, approaching Alaskan Athabascan ethno poetics through the metrical frame of song rhythm.



Fishnets on the Minto Flats at sunset.

Projection of future possibilities

Minto is a small place, but its relative isolation and conservative culture have preserved a powerful musical and linguistic legacy. Songs have been collected, and in some cases studied, for different Athabascan communities in Alaska. We hope to work toward further understanding of other Athabascan lyrical art by looking carefully at how words are bound to music in Minto songs. Specifically, we would like to understand better how words are affected by rhythmic patterns, and how the patterns of language (lexical, tonal or intonational) are related to melody and rhythm. This may require the collection and analysis of music from neighboring communities, where intonational and lexical patterns differ.

We also see opportunities for further work on post-contact music such as Native-language religious and secular music in translation (Gospel hymns and Country-Western songs). For the community at this time, the old song traditions have the highest priority, but linguistic and musical creativity is ongoing in both the traditional and post-contact genres. Translation of important texts such as the national anthem or a favorite hymn is the most common type of linguistic assistance requested when the topic of music comes up in the younger generations.

Since music can never be studied in an academic vacuum (especially not such deeply emotional music as the all-important memorial songs of Minto) it is expected that further inquiry will also provide new information on song-making practice, constraints on composition and performance, and the meaning of lyrics. As documenters, we are committed to handling all such information as completely as possible, and archiving what we cannot ourselves analyze. Fortunately, the Alaska Native Language Center Archive is moving toward a fully digital system that will facilitate further organization, linking and access for these materials.

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